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RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2876
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HAVANA 000162

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DEPT FOR WHA A/S TOM SHANNON
DEPT FOR CUBA TRANSITION COORDINATOR CALEB MCCARRY
NSC FOR SENIOR ADVISOR DAN FISK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2017

TAGS: PREL PGOV CU US

SUBJECT: MBR AND PAYA ON PRISONER RELEASES TO SPAIN

REF: HAVANA 0159

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Classified By: COM MICHAEL E. PARMLY FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) Summary: Dissidents Martha Beatriz Roque and Oswaldo Paya concur on most key points regarding the release of political prisoners from Cuba to Spain. COM spoke to both late the night of 17 February. MBR had spoken to one of the released (Pernet); Paya to two of the others (Alvarez Ramos and Gonzalez). The two dissidents agreed that all four are from the list of 75 arrested in 2003. They concur that the releases should be welcomed, or at least acknowledged, for the benefit to the four individuals and their families. (MBR is less strong on the "welcoming" point, but does believe it would be in bad taste to ignore the benefits for the individuals.) Both object strongly to the apparent conditioning of release to accepting exile in Spain, seeing it as particularly cruel to the individuals and their families. They have stated their outrage to the press. They also are puzzled by press reports that three other political prisoners were being released, and said that they could not confirm that development. (Subsequently, Portuguese Ambassador Godinho de Matos told COM on 18 February that MINREX Europe Director Teresita Vicente had told him that day that the other three individuals released were common prisoners.) Both MBR and Paya agree that Spanish electoral politics lay behind the deal and its timing. Whatever the international relations aspects of the deal, Paya remains convinced the GOC is feeling intense pressure within Cuba from the population for deep change. He and MBR intend to use the upcoming visits of Vatican reps and possibly others to press for further releases and for deeper democratic change. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In separate conversations the evening of February 17, leading Cuban dissidents Martha Beatriz Roque and Oswaldo Paya reviewed what they knew of the released political prisoners (reftel). While the two had different takes on the actual bios of the four, they concurred that all four were from the group of 75 arrested in Spring, 2003. MBR said that Omar Pernet Hernandez was an active member of her Asamblea, and that she knew well the case of Jose Gabriel Ramon, from Santiago de Cuba. Both of those two are unquestionably solid political prisoners, with long prison sentences left to serve

from the March 2003 crackdown. MBR asserted that both Pernet and Ramon suffered from a variety of health ailments. MBR was less certain that Pedro Pablo Alvarez was all that sick. She also noted that Alvarez had extensive family in Miami, not Spain. Finally, MBR said it was her impression that Alejandro Gonzalez, the fourth political prisoner released, was not subject to as harsh a regime in prison as the other three, and that Gonzalez even benefited from daily releases from prison, so long as he returned to spend the night in jail. Paya, on the other hand, said he could vouch for the bona fides of both Alvarez and Gonzalez, both in terms of their status as political activists being punished for peaceful pressure for change and of the length of sentences left to serve. Alvarez had been a leading activist promoting Paya's Varela Project; Gonzalez was a long-time member of Paya's Movimiento Cristiano de Liberacion (MCL).

¶13. (C) Paya said he had spoken to both Alvarez and Gonzalez in the previous 24 hours, after their arrival in Spain with family members. Both described the conditions of their release. Alvarez said he had been called in earlier last week by senior prison and Minint officials and told of his imminent release, but only on the condition that he agree to go to Spain. Alvarez was told bluntly that he would not be released if he insisted on staying in Cuba. MBR said Pernet had told her a similar account: Either accept exile in Spain or serve every day of his lengthy sentence. Pernet told MBR he was pained by the choice, as he much preferred staying in Cuba.

¶14. (C) Both Paya and MBR said they have to be happy for the release of the prisoners from what MBR called "the hell" of Cuban prisons. Both Paya and MBR had focused their initial comments to the press on that point, including its associated family reunification aspect. Paya and his wife Ofelia emphasized that their satisfaction for the individuals involved was sincere, and noted that it would be cynical for

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them to say anything different. MBR agreed, but she went on to note the strong reaction she had gotten from several other political prisoners still serving in Cuban jails. She said several had told her they would not accept release if it came with the condition of exile. Paya said several MCL prisoners had expressed over the phone the same sentiment to him.

¶15. (C) Paya and MBR focused much of their anger at the Spanish Government in Madrid for accepting what MBR called the Cuban Government's "cynical manipulation" of the lives and emotions of political prisoners and their families. They mocked the Spanish assertion that the releases were a "unilateral and sovereign act" of the Cuban Government, insisting that the negotiated aspect was glaringly obvious. Paya said his brother in Madrid had told him that the release had actually been prepared for November 2007, but that the PSOE Government preferred for the releases to be closer to the actual election date, and so had delayed it until now. Paya went on to note, however, that he saw a strong element of angst in the Cuban Government behavior in releasing the prisoners now. Even if the Cuban Government has yet to comment publicly on the releases, it is impossible not to see in the GOC's action an attempt to let off steam here at home. Paya linked the releases to the recent questioning by young Cuban students of Assembly President and Politburo member Ricardo Alarcon, as well as other signs of popular demand for change in the way Cuba is governed. The regime is trying to figure out what it can do to diminish the popular pressure. Releasing political prisoners is one option, especially since at least in Havana and in dissident circles nationwide, the releases are already well-known, in part as a result of Radio Marti broadcasts.

¶16. (C) Both MBR and Paya talked about next steps. If the regime is in a position where it is releasing long-term political prisoners, the outside world should step up the pressure on Havana for further releases. MBR and Paya insisted they cannot confirm the release - reported in the

Miami press but not confirmed as of the evening of 17 February by any other source - of three other 75'ers. Paya had the names of Alfredo Pulido, an MCL member from Camaguey; of Normando Hernandez, a seriously ill independent journalist whose plight MBR has been very active in promoting in recent months; and of Panque, a medical doctor and independent journalist. However, neither he nor MBR had been able to confirm with family members that any of the three had been let out. MBR said the Miami press had sourced the report to the Spanish Foreign Ministry, but the Spanish Embassy in Havana was unable to confirm.

¶7. (C) Paya speculated that the upcoming visit to Cuba the week of February 18 of Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Bertone could be occasion for further releases, and speculated that the additional three names could be included in what he understood would be a Vatican pitch to the GOC for more releases. Paya has asked to see Bertone during his visit. In any case, Paya intends to attend the open Mass at the Havana Cathedral on 21 August, and will attempt to get to Bertone then, even if his request for a private meeting is rebuffed. MBR shared with us a letter to Bertone she intended to release publicly on 18 February. The aim of both Paya's intended meeting and MBR's letter is straightforward and direct: A call for the release all the political prisoners in Cuba. MBR's eloquent letter emphasizes that, "We don't want the regime to grant, as some kind of gift, the freedom of two or three political prisoners; that would be an ignominy, a form of marketing with the emotions of those who suffer and their families, converting them into barter." Both Paya and MBR also said they did not intend to "fall into the trap" of lists of political prisoners. While helpful at times as illustrative, Paya said that "Such lists are exclusionary," since they almost inevitably leave out worthy individuals. MBR asserted, "The regime knows who it has in jail." Paya noted that his movement had focused in recent months on the thousands of Cuban youth picked up and held for "peligrosidad" or dangerousness. "What about them?" Paya asked rhetorically. Beyond Bertone's visit, MBR said she understood that Belgian/EC Commissioner and long-time regime interlocutor Louis Michel is due back on the island on March 7. Surely Michel would want to press for

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more releases, MBR opined (visibly tongue in cheek, but sincerely nonetheless).

¶8. (C) We urged both Paya and MBR to strengthen their appeal by coordinating their efforts with others on the island. Both were receptive if cautious about the idea. We reminded them of the success of the "Unity for Liberty" document produced in April 2007 in the wake of the Moratinos visit to Cuba. MBR said she understood the EC office in Havana was thinking of gathering together late the week of 18 February key dissident leaders to review developments. We reminded Paya that it was at just such a gathering in 2007 that the dissidents had decided on their "Unity for Liberty" statement. Paya nodded.

9.(C) Comment: If the regime counted on the release of four -or even seven - to dampen down the call for change on the island, we believe they miscalculated. We have yet to take the measure of the mood among our diplomatic colleagues, and the regime's tactics, aided and abetted by the GOS, will surely have an effect in some chanceries around the world. (Interestingly, Portuguese Ambassador Godinho de Matos told us late 18 February he doubted many EU members would be swayed by the expected Spanish arguments for greater engagement, at least if the release cum exile was the argument Madrid uses. Whether Fidel's announced resignation has that effect is another matter.) Our own sense matches that of Paya: That it is only because of principled positions calling for the release of all political prisoners, combined with the groundswell within Cuba calling for economic and social - and political -- change that the regime is being brought to act.

PARMLY